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X Rubicon: The hidden casualties of secret wars

Jim Kable

6–7 minutes

Former U.S. Army Ranger Sean Griobhtha's 'X Rubicon' is a powerful and deeply unsettling account of war, trauma and the hidden human cost of covert military operations, writes Jim Kable.

JUST DAYS AGO, I sat in a cinema here in southeast Australia watching yet another slick military recruitment advert — young men and women jogging along a beach, throwing themselves into the late afternoon surf.

Career. Adventure. Mateship.

What the advert doesn't show is the aftermath: moral injury, PTSD, suicides and a Veterans Affairs apparatus seemingly purposed to wriggle out of its duty of care. It is against this backdrop that Sean Griobhtha's *X Rubicon* demands to be read.

Griobhtha (pronounced gree-O-tah), a former U.S. Army Ranger, tells the verified account of a young man he trained – identified only by his CIA-assigned code name, Rubicon – who enlisted in the U.S. Air Force at 18 in 1979, a time of desperate unemployment, and was channelled into a classified Scout program to carry out CIA proxy war operations across Central and

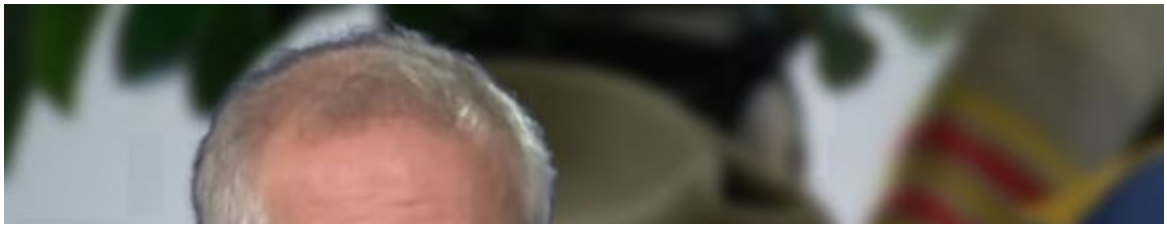
South America.

Over two-and-a-half years, Rubicon completed 18 combat assignments involving 14 operations, from El Salvador and Guatemala to Nicaragua, Colombia and Mexico, missions so deeply classified that the agencies which ordered them will deny their existence until 2085.

This is not speculation. Reproduced in full within the book is a four-page letter (redacted) from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, received by Rubicon in May 2021 after years of stonewalled requests. That letter confirms his operational record: the Air Force Cross, two Silver Stars, four Bronze Stars, the Defense Superior Service Medal and the CIA Distinguished Service Medal — every one of which was stripped from him when he refused to continue killing.

Rubicon's DD-214 discharge document was so heavily compromised as to be useless. His separation reason was listed, with characteristic military contempt, as *'APATHY — DEFECTIVE ATTITUDE'*. He was still in his early 20s.

The ODNI letter also granted conditional permission to publish his account, provided it *'appear to be fictional'*. Griobhtha and Rubicon turned this absurd demand on its head. As the Author Statement declares: this work is fiction only in the sense of the lies, corruption and false agendas which made it all possible. The truth of what was done to one young man and what he did on behalf of his country is not fiction.



What followed the separation was nearly four decades of silence and suffering — severe PTSD, three suicide attempts, the unbearable weight of carrying the ghosts of over 300 people killed by his own hands. His one lifeline was his wife Julie, whose remarkable foreword — titled *'Or, The Vanguard'* — recounts years of hiding knives and medications, of practising hypervigilance, of loving a man who could not tell her what haunted him until he finally broke the silence.

The book makes a devastating case that the adolescent brain – its frontal lobes still years from maturity – is neurologically incapable of the moral reasoning these missions demanded. Rubicon was 18. The military knew.

Griobhtha, who had lost contact with Rubicon in 1982 but tracked him down in 2015, spent years independently verifying the account — interviewing pilots, flight engineers, Rangers, SEALs, CIA analysts, State Department personnel, and civilians across multiple countries. The result is a work of forensic rigour wrapped in raw, cinematic prose.

In a striking development, the 2026 edition includes a letter from a retired Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC)

Commander, a general officer, who used his security clearance to access CIA records and photographs of Rubicon's missions. What he found left him shaken.

Writing on his last sheet of official letterhead, the Commander underwent what he described as a Smedley Butler–like transformation and offered what amounts to an apology on behalf of the United States: unofficial, but written, he said, with firm conviction and a heart of truth. It is a remarkable document — a senior officer confirming the existence of CIA-held mission records and photographs, and acknowledging what was done to young men in the name of national security.

The book also now contains *'Before You Sign: A Letter to the Young'*, published under Creative Commons and republished by the National Network Opposing the Militarisation of Youth (NNOMY) and Veterans For Peace. It is an invaluable resource for any parent, educator, or young person weighing military enlistment.

I am reminded of Mary O'Hare's furious challenge to Kurt Vonnegut: *"You were just babies then!"* — her insistence that he not glamorise what was done to children sent to war. X Rubicon honours that charge. It does not glamorise. It does not flinch.

This is an amazing *cri de coeur* — and an indictment of an entire nation for the sacrifice of its young. Gritty, cinematic, forensically documented and above all, honest. I highly recommend this book. It requires reading and re-reading, and it is beyond worth the effort.

X Rubicon is available from Booktopia and other bookstores around Australia.

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